

# Feast Budget and Preparation:

How to Stuff a Crowd Economically

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## Overview:

Fáilte! This class is intended to take potential (though tentative) Head Cooks through the basic planning processes for a feast. The class will proceed from the benefits of shopping early (and often) to prep to rolling it out to the table. We will also discuss menus and ingredients—especially show-stoppers (good and bad.)

## Getting Started:

Congratulations! You have just been selected to cook for 150 of your closest friends and have never cooked for as much as a party of 12. Welcome to the SCA, helium hand! So, how are you going to pull this off without employing any of the phrases: “What was I thinking?”, “Why didn’t you stop me?”, “What a fiasco?”, or “Did that sign say next exit, Nobleman’s Lane?”

First, take a few deep breaths, check your pulse...less than 110, it’s a start...and let’s get to work. Here are the basic items to address:

1. Plan: Start early, do it well, and re-examine regularly;
2. Shop: Do it early, do it often, and avoid doing it on that Saturday;
3. Proper Quantity: Roll ‘em away from the table stuffed but avoid leftovers;
4. Profit: Make a little—but only a little—coin for the group;
5. Show: Make the feast memorable...in a good way, if possible.

## Plan:

### *Budget*

Establish good preliminary numbers—resist the urge to get lost in the weeds! Start with coarse numbers and refine them. To prepare a good working budget, you need to know a couple of basic items:

1. How many people are you willing to cook for? Don’t be shy about telling the nobility, seneschal, and populace what your comfort level is...it reduces the number of psychiatric visits.
2. What is the occupancy limit of the hall? Without getting exotic, you should not try to exceed legal limits...people will not be comfortable—especially the seneschal who has to explain the problem to the fire marshal.

*Rule of Thumb: SCA capacity = 3/4 Normal fire restriction.*

3. Which meal are you cooking? The cost per head is lower for a luncheon than for a feast. On average, per head cost for feast is \$4.50 to \$5.50; per head cost for luncheon is \$3.00...assuming 100 mouths to feed. Also, per head price goes up as the head count goes down on a given meal.

From those three numbers, you should be able to negotiate a reasonable spread. For example, 150 people for side-board luncheon should have a budget of \$450, while a feast for the same number should have a budget of \$675 to \$825. This approach gives you a limit to work towards...this is the boundary.

Warning: Do not let the nobility, seneschal, or populace browbeat you about cost! “I’m sure you can do feast for \$500, can’t you dear?” If someone is that sure, then they should have put in a bid themselves...oh, be sure to offer to help in their kitchen next time so you can see how they do it—never pass up the opportunity to learn in another cook’s kitchen, whether good or bad. In the meantime, stick to your numbers.

#### *Schedule for Black Star*

One key to a successful feast is promoting it. The best promotion you have is through the Black Star. Mind you not to forget other communications like e-mail and webpage but use the newsletter to its greatest advantage. Make sure and get your final menu to the autocrat/seneschal in time for the last flyer publication. The deadline for a given issue is the first day of the month prior. So, here is a quick exercise of planning backwards:

- Event is in June
- Deadline for June Black Star is 1 May
- Final menu to the autocrat/seneschal on 15 April to allow inclusion in flyer.

#### *Schedule for Feast*

You have just seen the simplest formula for a successful feast...plan it backwards! For this to work, you need to know the following:

1. When will feast start? Work with the autocrat to establish the start time for feast and stick to it. The autocrat needs it for the flyer and site handout; you need it to keep the populace...and autocrat...at bay!
2. How many courses are you serving? Establish reasonable segments to serve. If you try to serve too much, you will be hard-pressed to get it to the table warm (or cool) as you want it properly served. If you try to serve too little, the servers will be run ragged and the populace half-starved...neither of which is desirable.
3. How much time for each course? This time period will affect the overall length of the feast...especially when you factor in presentation pieces like a suckling pig on a spit borne by two servers and three trumpets.

From this information, you should be able to back out your cooking times, i.e., time into the oven or on to the stove. Hence, plan it backward! While you will need to do this for all your dishes, here is a quick exercise for meat and pasta in the second course:

- Feast starts at 6 p.m. and you want each course (3 total) to take 30 minutes
- Second course will roll out at 6:30 p.m.
- Meat takes 3½ hours to cook, 15 to cool, and 15 to slice and plate...4 hours, total
  - Meat needs to go in oven at 2:30 p.m.
- Pasta takes 20 minutes to cook, 20 to rinse and plate...40 minutes, total
  - Pasta needs to go on stove at 5:50 p.m.

You just got meat and pasta on table at 6:30 p.m. as planned. Congratulations!

Now, repeat this process for all dishes in all courses...and look for the conflicts where you do not have enough space on your stove or in your oven. Ask yourself, “Can I cook a dish in stages? Can I cook it ahead of time and merely warm it?” Make sure you resolve all conflicts before you get to the site! Extend this to planning pre-cooks!

#### Shop:

Shop early! Shop often! Avoid shopping on the day of the event! Hopefully, you will have at least six months to prepare your menu...after all, you need to get it wrapped up and to the seneschal for publication two months before the event (refer to Plan, Schedule for Black Star).

With six months or more (preferable), you can take advantage of sales. A good source for roasting beef is brisket, which is normally on sale at Memorial Day and Labor Day. Try to take advantage of these seasonal sales...and make friends with folks who have large freezers.

Speaking of season, when shopping for your feast, keep the season of the event in mind. You may find items you want...and allocate part of your budget...in May that are not available at your October event. By then, the costs may escalate dramatically – a good example is fresh strawberry...you can still find them in October but they will fetch a more princely price.

Shop early! Shop often! You should shop before you put in the bid...cursory things like price of beef and chicken; then, you should shop after you get the bid to give yourself a baseline; and then, you should shop until prep time – except for the day of the event. So long as the price is stable, you will not need to purchase the item until it is time to cook. However, you will know when you spot a good price – remember to watch the sales.

Also, remember that the proper time for preparation (and hence the preparatory buying) is not necessarily at the event...a great deal can be done at pre-cooks – everything from cleaning and cutting to full cooking for warming at the event.

#### Proper Quantity:

There exists a fine line between stuffed populace and leftovers or overt waste. However, it is vast gulf between starved and sated. Make sure to address the gulf first (the previous budget numbers will get you there) and then move on to the fine line.

The most popular Rule-of-Thumb is the “Quarter Pounder” rule: bread, meat, starch, veggies, and drink, in the quantity of a normal value meal. If you put out a one-course meal, this will serve you well enough. However, if you are looking at a three-course meal, which is over an hour from start to finish, your reputation will not be well-served...and neither will the populace. Most of all, never – NEVER – give them less! Consider the “Quarter Pounder” rule as your minimum service.

Personally, I prefer at least twice that noted above...plus dessert. After all, we are taking a normal meal and stretching it out over a long time. They get to enjoy each dish and let their food settle...and find a little more room. Also, figure in that people will have likes and dislikes, so they will not eat every single dish in the amount you plan.

With regard to proper quantity, consider the fact that the crowd will be most ravenous of the first course and will slow down as the meal proceeds. As such, you should plan on smaller quantities of the latter dishes...and scatter dishes for a more discerning palate throughout the feast.

Again, my personal bias is toward presenting the simpler, more readily recognized dishes early. Thus, the appetite's edge has been dulled and the crowd will be ready to accept more subtle offerings.

#### Profit:

At this point, you should be warned...I am very fussy about making profits that border on the obscene. We are serving our friends in our home (if only for the evening) – and charging them \$10 for a \$5-meal is beyond being bad hosts. I encourage each and every person in this class to carry that forth. Make a profit that is appropriate – a dollar or two is fine but stop at that.

As head cook, it is your responsibility to prepare a fine meal to host your friends...a 100 or more of the finest people you may never get to meet in person. But your job is to be a good host through your food. Please keep that ever in your mind...and do what you can to teach it to more fiscally-minded individuals who care more for the size of the bank account.

#### Show:

##### *Toppers*

Give yourself and your crew the opportunity to shine. Several avenues are at your disposal:

1. Presentation at High Table
2. Subtleties on the dessert tray
3. Engaging feast themes, e.g., historical menu for ruler or appropriate for season

These examples are but a few areas to enjoy. Given the time, many items can be constructed from scratch with extraordinary results. A simple (though time-consuming) touch is to make, rather than buy, pasta noodles or pie shells. Such a measure will save money and provide a dish which gives an even greater measure of your dedication to the art of cooking and to populace you are serving.

##### *Stoppers*

Finally, beware those items which will bring your feast to a grinding halt. Now, some of these examples cannot be avoided; however, the pre-cooking performed, the less grief they cause:

1. Three hours of electrical outage...two in the morning; one in the afternoon.

2. All the hall toilets back up.
3. A runaway oven, i.e., temperature setting 325F gives you 550F.
4. A bad oven pilot light, i.e., belly on the floor every 10 minutes.
5. Too much weirdness, i.e., dormice—real ones!

Personally, I have managed to avoid only the last one...not much of a fan for small crunchy birds. As a caution, the last item is the only show-stopper that is preventable. Always take your audience into consideration – and this is a performance. Dishes too far out of the norm need to be kept to a small fraction of the menu. I believe in broadening the palates of the populace but doing so for the Kingdom is a pain-staking, time-consuming...don't try to do it all in one night.

### Parting Shot

Please use whatever information you can from this paper and share it as you see fit. Nothing herein is protected in any way, shape, or form...especially my opinions.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [ld\\_tadhg@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ld_tadhg@sbcglobal.net) and I should have copies of this document on my website [www.geocities.com/ld\\_tadhg/](http://www.geocities.com/ld_tadhg/) shortly...it's not much but I don't get paid for web stuff.

Sláinte!